Chapter 12

The Penetration of Islam into Mossi Country

Islam in the Land of the Mogho Naba

643 794 771 The Mogho Naba, like his subjects, is above all an animist, and it is hard to understand how he reconciles his fetishism with the complex dogmas of Islam and with the many interdictions of Christianity.

The Mogho Naba, however, is quite capable of being a Catholic or a Moslem on appropriate occasions and at the same time respecting the traditions of his ancestors. Thus, when the Christians celebrate Christmas, the emperor of the Mossi devoutly attends Midnight Mass. He keeps his cap on, however, just as the bishop wears his miter. In the same way he embraces Islam during the following three festivals: the moaghrem (the Mossi zembendé); Ramadan (nolokré, "to loosen the mouth"); and, finally, the zoulhési (the Mossi tabaski or kibsa).

797 Before describing how the Mogho Naba celebrates these Moslem festivals, we shall give a brief history of Islam among the Mossi and discuss the appointment of imams.

The Arrival of Islam among the Mossi

797 793 It was during the reign of Naba Doulgou, the twenty-third Mogho Naba [204] after Oubri, founder of the Ouagadougou dynasty, that Islam took root in the empire of the Mogho Naba, and it was at that time that an imam was appointed at Ouagadougou.

Naba Sawadogo, who succeeded his father, Doulgou, sent his children to the Koranic school. Many of them obtained a fairly good education there, and the eldest son, who later succeeded to the throne under the name of Naba Koutou, even became a marabout. The development of Islam in Mossi country dates from his reign, as does practice of giving children of the Mogho Naba Moslem names such as Saïdou, Mahama, Moumouni, etc.

174 114 traveler himself, between the people of Gotto who were mixed in this affair and the Mossi of Yatenga who made the expedition. Finally, Naba Kango, although he brought great glory /29/ in the eighteenth century to the Mossi dynasty of Yatenga, obviously did not find, at the beginning of his reign, an absolute fragmentation of small countries which he would have gathered under single authority. He doubtless limited himself to restoring a kingdom that had formerly been powerful and centralized, and which he made so again through his personal prestige. In any case, he did not give his name to the Mossi (it is, on the contrary, the Mossi who, in Mungo-Park's description, give him his name), any more than to the capital which he indeed founded and which he called Ouahigouya. All these details are thus false or imaginary, but the principal fact remains and is very interesting. Mungo-Park arrived in Ségou just in time, in 1796, to [153] record it before the weak memories of the Mossi and Bambara Negroes would have condemned it to hopeless oblivion. /30/

Chapter 4

The Cult of the Sun Among the Mossi

794 Do the Mossi adore the sun? And is their great god Ouendé partly or wholly a sun god?

Binger was the first to state that the Mossi adored the sun. "They are fetishists," he says (1), "but they have a cult of the sun, which

1. Du Niger au golfe de Guinée /From the Niger to the Gulf of Guinea/, Vol. I, p. 492.

still today bears the same name as God; they call it Wouidi."

In turn, Lieutenant Desplagnes, in his Plateau Central Nigérien /Central Nigerian Plateau/ (pp. 275, 276) said in 1907:

"The Hougho-Ouango of Mossi (these priests live in Mossi in the villages of Boujema, Mani, Kondogho, Yolo, Tio) make sacrifices to the sun in order to bind it to the earth, morning and evening, at

794 sunrise and at sunset, during the first week of the winter season, then, later, only every six days, in the morning at sunrise. They go to the [778] altars, formed by three conical stones, to offer sacrifices and libations, always surrounded by all the people, the heads of families, tom-tom players, and family masks (Ouango).

"During the entire year, in a highly decorated niche dug into a [372] wall of their houses, the priests watch the sacred fire with which, at the end of the rainy season, they must light the great purifying brush fires."

Lieutenant Desplagnes adds in a note:

"They make sacrifices at each new moon, and then have seven great feasts each year for the divinity. Finally, during the sun festivals, [28] they use a cow's tail to tie the sun to the earth and assure its fertilizing warmth." /31/

794 171 In my book Noir du Soudan, Pays Mossi et Gourounsi /Blacks of the Sudan, Country of the Mossi and Gourounsi/ (1912), I reproduced this page of Lieutenant Desplagnes without comment (page 590). In addition, I described the cult of the sun among the Gourounsi, who, like the Mossi, are part of the Voltaic family. Thus, on page 241, I wrote:

"The Kassonfra, like the Nounouma and the Menkiéra, say that they offer no sacrifice either to the moon or to the sun. However, I found an exception in the village of Nitiédougou (canton of Sia). It would seem that here, in the early mornings when the sun rises and begins to leave the horizon, people offer it a chicken or whatever else they wish to offer. Moreover, this sacrifice is only made when the voro (1) says it should be made.

1. Soothsayer.

"My informant claims that this same procedure is followed, not only in Nitiédougou and in the little canton of Sia, but also in all of the Kasouna (Kassonfra and Kassonboura) country. He must be mistaken (2) since my previous informants and my interpreter, who is

2. Today, on the other hand, I tend to think he was right.

Kassonboura, have neither seen nor heard of anything like it."

● 794 Later, in 1917, in my book Noir du Yatenga /Blacks of Yatenga/, since the few attempts that I had made in Yatenga to find this cult of the sun had given no results, I wrote (page 277):

"The sun is called ouindigho or ouindígha in Mossi (tili in Bambara). The word has a certain relationship with Ouendé, and the word Ouendé seems to be part of the construction of the word ouindigho. In any case, the Mossi and the Foulsé of Yatenga make no sacrifices to the sun. I interrogated in vain several important people about the details given by Lieutenant Desplagnes, pages 275 and 276 of his work, Plateau Central Nigérien about a cult of the sun in Mossi. It is true that these details concern the religious society of the Ouango and the villages where the members of this society would be operating: this would apply to villages of the Residency of Kaya (such as, Mané, Boujéma, etc.). One could thus pursue the studies in Kaya. /32/ In any case, the cult of the sun is totally unknown in Yatenga."

In my conclusion, I denied that there was a cult of the sun among the Mossi of Yatenga, while I admitted that one might be able to find this cult in other parts of Mossi country, particularly in the Residency (today, the circle) of Kaya.

794 114 The question was at that point when Father Eugène Mangin published a study on the Mossi in Anthropos ("Les Mossi. Essai sur les us et coutumes du Soudan Occidental" /The Mossi, an Essay on the Usages and Customs of Western Sudan/, Vienna, 1916), a study in which the author, who lived for a long time in Ouagadougou among the central Mossi, brought most of his effort to bear on a study of the religious life of his charges. It may well be that Father Mangin's observations touch upon the question of sun worship in that country in a definitive manner, better than Binger and Desplagnes had done.

794 The Mossi, says Father Mangin, in their sacrifices to Ouendé, offer water for his rising and pour it to the east, and offer water for his setting and pour it to the west. In an argument, the weakest will also say: "God (Ouendé) is my witness that I have done you no harm, God [796] will give it back to you," and he will point to the sun. Thus, Ouendé, the principal god of the Mossi, is indeed a sun god, and indeed the Mossi worship, in him, the sun.

Does this mean that Ouendé cannot also be a god of the sky or of the atmosphere, as I maintained in my Noir du Yatenga? Certainly not, and indeed Father Mangin mentions that Ouendé commands

794 lightning as well, which he can do only if he is the Sky-Atmosphere.
[82] "The natural phenomena," he says, "are sometimes attributed to God. Lightning kills those who have done evil, it kills the animal ill-gotten through fraud or theft, and it is God who sends lightning as a punishment..." Thus, Ouendé, while being the sun, is also the Sky-Atmosphere, and other things too, for he has characteristics that go
[797] beyond the sun divinity and the sky divinity. We must not forget here that the Allah of the Moslems is well known among the Mossi and has his established representatives there (Yarsé of Mandé origin, Peul, etc.), or temporary ones (merchants who have come from the north or south, Soninnké /Soninke/, Songhay, Dyoula). Thus, for a long time, /38/ the Moslem conception of god could and has, in effect, rubbed off on the sun-atmosphere-god of the Mossi. The latter might have waged war on the Songhay sultans who led religious crusades against them, yet it is also true that they were content to bestow upon their most important god the remarkable characteristics that struck them and that they admired in the Moslem god. Thus, Ouendé gradually became more and more a supreme god, although it would seem that in the beginning, he was only a sun god and an atmosphere god, first separated, later fused with a predominance of the sun god element.

To summarize, it has been well established that one finds the cult of the sun among the Mossi, along with many other elements as
[171] we have just shown. I have since found this cult among the Dorhosié (1922) and the Gouro (1923). However, among the Gouro, it is relegated to a few fetishists and does not interest the bulk of the population. Among the Dorhosié, on the contrary, it interests the vast multitude and occasions a solemn sacrifice made in the winter, at the end of the old year and the beginning of the new. Among these people, however, the sun divinity has not become a leading divinity as it has among the Mossi. It is one divinity among several and is rather subordinate to the cult of the Earth-brush and that of the Sky-atmosphere. Moreover, I am persuaded that more far-reaching studies among all the branches of the Voltaic population would uncover, here and there, the cult of the sun, as among the Mossi, the Gourounsi, the Dorhosié, etc.

[pp. 34 ff. not processed]

778 whose ancestors had ruled the soil of the territory. In the name of
782 the Moro Naba, he entrusted him with the task of offering all those gifts to the Earth so that the latter might favor the sovereign. Ouagadougou Naba performed the sacrifice before the door of his soukala.

[721] When the Moro Naba went to war, he also ordered the chief of Ougadougou to perform a sacrifice to the Earth. The bara indicated what should be sacrificed in order to insure victory, to "break" the villages that were to be attacked.

782 When rain failed to come, the Moro Naba would go to the hillock at Koumbé /sic/-Padanda, and have the head of the quarter offer a sacrifice (beef, sheep, chicken) to secure rain. If rain refused to come, the bara were consulted once more, and sacrifices were offered until it came.

776 The Mossi also have a sky god whom they call Ounam as well
782 as Naba Ouendé or Naba Ouondé, meaning "Sun Chief." This is a
●794 trace of the sun cult, which is unusual in Black West Africa, all opinions to the contrary notwithstanding. /590/ The majority of the Mossi sacrifice much more to ancestors and to the Earth than to Naba Ouondé, who is to them a somewhat remote god.

794 It must be added that Lieutenant Desplagnes found among the
782 Mossi an esoteric cult of the sun, moon, and fire, which is peculiar to religious initiates (Ouango) whom we shall mention later.

"The Hougho-Ouango of the Mossi (among the Mossi, those priests reside in the villages of Boujema, Mani, Kondogho, Yolo, and Tio) sacrifice to the sun in order to bind it to the Earth. They do this morning and evening, sunrise and sunset, during the first week of the winter season, and every six days in the morning at sunrise thereafter [778] They also go to altars made of three conical stones and offer sacrifices and libations, always surrounded by the populace, family heads, drummers, and familial masks (ouango).

794 "Those priests tend the sacred fire throughout the year in a
372 small, highly adorned recess dug into one of their house walls. At
783 the end of the rainy season they will use it to light the great purifying bush fires.

794 "They perform sacrifices at every new moon, and they have
782 seven important feasts a year for their divinity. Finally, during the solar festivities, they use a cow's tail to tie down the sun to the earth and to bind its life-giving heat." (Le Plateau central nigérien /The Central Nigerian Plateau/, pages 275 and 276.)

8: Skinner E-5 (1955-1957) 1958
FA28 Mossi FA28

797 167 sands of Mossi who fled their homeland to escape forced labor or military service ultimately returned as Moslems, but the majority of seasonal migrants do not have enough contact with foreign populations for them to become Moslems. Most of the Mossi who migrate to Ghana work on cocoa farms far removed from large centers of population. It is also true that even those Mossi who worked for Moslems on the farms and found it expedient to "pray" (as the Mossi refer to conversion to Islam) soon reverted to paganism on their return in order to escape the displeasure of their lineage members. I have recorded several cases of pagans who became Moslems only when they returned from abroad to find their relatives all converted to Islam.

571 797 554 566 [567] Today there are obvious rewards for those Mossi who embrace Islam; besides such tangible rewards as getting wives and children, there are the intangible ones of upward social mobility and greater prestige. It is important to note that most liberated slaves and serfs are now Moslems. Formerly these non-Mossi had low status, but today those who have been to Mecca bear such proud titles as *Hadji*. On the night before Ramadan, one of these men gave a talk before the Nobéré chief during which he chided the chief for his impiety and voiced the hope that the next chief would be a true Moslem. He admitted that the chief might interpret such a speech from a former serf as impertinence, but he begged him to accept the censure as coming from the servant of *Nabiyama* (the prophet). This same man had refused to pay homage to the chief at the annual sacrifice to the ancestors, and when admonished returned the daughter which the chief had given him as a wife. In earlier days a chief would not have given a daughter to a serf, and moreover, a disrespectful serf could be killed instantly.

797 291 515 Many French administrators and Christian missionaries allege that Mossi youth embrace Islam because they like the beautiful robes and red fezzes of the Moslems, but this is a naive explanation for the conduct of a highly sophisticated people. Most young men in Nobéré wear Moslem-type clothes because such clothes are the mode. Now that sun helmets, dark glasses, and women's raincoats with hoods are in vogue, pagans as well as Moslems wear them. What is of interest, however, is that when pagans become Moslems they wear cleaner clothes and affect a different style of life.

● 794 577 The local consensus is that Moslems are much better behaved than pagans because they do not swear, fight, or get drunk in public. The man chosen as Imam is required to have such characteristics as mercy toward evil-doers, benevolence, magnanimity, physical beauty, and virility. Yet many Mossi say that the Moslems can be worse than any other people. They accuse them of being charlatans, of selling Koranic verses as charms, and of committing murder by the use of magical formulae. Neither pagans nor Moslems believe that a man is necessarily good because he recites his daily prayers or goes to Mecca.

794 Moslems in the district follow most precepts of their religion: they recite the five daily prayers according to the rites of Tidjani (there are only two Moslems of the Hamada sect in the district and no members of the Hamallist sect), give alms to the poor, observe the month-long fast (called by the Mossi the

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FA28 Mossi FA28

Karême), celebrate the great festival of Ramadan and the lesser festivals, and aspire to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Most of the Moslems can lead prayers, but only about one-tenth of their number can read and recite the Koran. However, today the masters (*karasambas*) of the 32 Koranic schools in the district are endeavoring to instruct the many boys and few girls in reading the Koran and understanding Moslem theology.

The Karême is observed by most adult Moslems in the community with the exception of invalids and working men. Moslems say that the fast is intended to turn the minds of the people to God, and they distinguish between the Moslems "of the mouth" who break the fast and those "of the heart" who fast until Ramadan. The crescent moon of Ramadan is greeted with guns and general rejoicing and the following morning the Moslems gather at the tomb of Ngado to give praises to God; during the rest of the day they pay homage to the chief and visit their friends. However, a change in the traditional observance of Ramadan is expected, because one of the Moslem leaders objects to the ceremony at the tomb of Ngado. He feels that some Moslems are beginning to regard the tomb of the first Moslem as an earth shrine or Tengkougre.

So far, only five of the more prominent Moslems in the district have made or are making the pilgrimage to Mecca. The first man made the voyage about seven years ago, and is now conducting a Koranic school in a neighboring district. His brother went to Mecca about two years ago and is now the senior *El Hadj* in the district. Of the two men who were on the pilgrimage when I arrived in the district, one has since died near the Red Sea and the other is still away. One other man left for Mecca and returned to the district during my stay. Most of the pilgrims now fly to Mecca; only two men followed the traditional route through Ghana, Kano, Lake Chad, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (now Sudan), and on to Mecca. In general, all pilgrims have used their own resources for the trip, but they receive some help from their lineage brothers and from the other Moslems in the district and in Ouagadougou.

The pilgrimage to Mecca represents the greatest event in the lives of the district Moslems. When the last pilgrim left, a great crowd gathered at his house and prayed for his safe journey, and some even accompanied him to Ouagadougou and remained there until he left. The Moslems and many pagans of the district, under the command of the district chief, cultivated his fields during his absence. And when the new El Hadj returned, a large crowd accompanied him to his house with shouts of joy. There he killed a sheep in thanksgiving, sprinkled the crowd with holy water from Mecca, and recounted his experiences. His listeners were impressed by his airplane flight and the description of Mecca, but they showed the greatest interest when he said that Mecca women covered their faces and that most Meccan men were monogamous. The local Moslems smiled when they heard this bit of news from one of their members, but I have seen them scowl when discussing the monogamous practice desired by the Christians.

The attitudes of Moslems differ very little from those of the other Mossi as regards children and polygyny. They say that they do not believe in the

8: Skinner E-5 (1955-1957) 1958
FA28 Mossi FA28

efficacy of ancestor veneration and do not "kill chickens" to the ancestors, but they maintain that it is a man's duty to have many wives so that he may have children to succeed him. Furthermore, since Mohammed himself decreed that his followers may keep four wives, provided they treat each with the same degree of kindness, there is no conflict between Islamic tenets and Mossi practice of polygny. The average Moslem has two wives, but even the few men in the district who have more than four wives do not appear overly concerned about transgressing the tenets of their faith. Mossi Moslems have not adopted the paternal parallel cousin marriage so common among other Moslems, and show surprise when told that Islam permits such marriages. However, they have modified their marriage behavior to harmonize with what they consider an Islamic tenet that "a man should not marry the widow of his father." The Moslem Mossi profess to look with horror on these marriages among their pagan brothers, preferring the levirate instead.

The Moslems' attitude toward the low status of women in Mossi society has not changed, and in one respect it can even be said that this attitude has been strengthened. Many Moslem wives now cover their faces, and many El Hadjis have attempted to place their wives in purdah by preventing them from going to the market for fear they would come in contact with pagan men. The development of this practice is running counter to the growing emancipation of Mossi women, who have just begun to leave their villages for periodic visits to the larger towns. Nevertheless, the important fact is that the Mecca pilgrims have the opportunity to see Moslem women playing roles which are forbidden or unknown to Mossi women. And while it is true that the Mossi pilgrims would not easily adopt and foster monogamy, their receptivity to new Islamic beliefs and customs might have a liberating effect on their treatment of women. Once institutional and cultural changes have been accepted by the El Hadjis, they are likely to spread quite rapidly throughout the society because men who have visited Mecca are believed to have returned filled with wisdom and understanding.

Christianity came to the Mossi on January 24, 1900, shortly after French conquest. As noted above, the first missionaries were well treated, but the Mossi balked at the attempts at conversion. Nevertheless, by 1919 the White Fathers of the Catholic missions had established several centers, among which was the district of Manga where this study was conducted. Manga is considered a Catholic district, but there are only 3,000 Catholics out of a population of 124,000—which also includes 9,200 Moslems and five Protestants. Thus, in contrast to Moslem Nobéré, which has no Catholics or Protestants, Manga, like most districts in Mossi territory, has a Moslem community.

The conversion of the Mossi in Manga to Catholicism follows the classical pattern of missionary proselytization in the country. Monsignor Socquet (1956:62) states that the Mossi always react to attempts at conversion with the statement: " 'We are looking at our chief,' that is to say, 'We will follow our chief in conversion as in all other matters. If he is favorable to it, then we will not go against his will.' " Socquet concludes: "It is thus understandable

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FA28 Mossi FA28

595 797 182 co-wives and other women of the extended families. Even the Catholic husbands would not help their wives with household tasks requiring more than one person, nor would they violate tradition by chatting with their wives except at night in their huts. Another factor is that after the Mossi Christian [846] woman has given birth to a child, she follows the traditional custom and goes back to her parents' home to remain there during the two or three years' lactation period. This imposes a great hardship on a Catholic husband because during this time he is left without wife or helpmate. In the extended family household there would have been women to take care of a man's material needs, and his mistresses would have taken care of his sexual needs. The Catholic can and does ask the mission for a young girl to take care of his material needs, but of course she is not expected to satisfy his sexual de- [837] sires. Obviously this arrangement is not satisfactory, and many Catholic men, with the acquiescence of their wives, keep mistresses. Dim Delobson comments:

> Ouagadougou has a large number of Christians, but does this mean that these people in their love for the church respect all her rules? Alas! there are a large number of Christians who oblige their lawful wives to leave the conjugal couch and make way for the accommodation of mistresses . . . in conformity with the old custom. But this is a subject which is too delicate to discuss further. I only note it in passing: *Noli me tangere* (1934:169).

797 794 Despite the influence of tradition on Mossi Catholics, I feel it would be a mistake to say that the complexity of Catholic dogma is one of the drawbacks to missionary success in this country. One Mossi has already been made a bishop of the Catholic Church, and most of the proselytizing in Manga falls on the two Mossi priests and the five Mossi nuns. Under the supervision of two White Fathers, the Catholic children and adults are acquainted with the dogma and rituals of the church. The festivals are well attended and celebrated with as much pomp as possible. Although the Mass is sung in Latin, the Mossi have adapted some of their traditional tunes to the Mass, and use their own language for prayers and hymns. Catholics observe all the sacraments including Confession—a sacrament which is hazardous from the Mossi point of view, because man must lay bare his innermost thoughts to the priests, who, in the final analysis, are Europeans and thus administrators.

It is true that even the staunchest Catholics in Manga have not abandoned all belief in traditional rituals and religious credos. For example, many [754] Mossi Catholics believe in the existence of sorcerers, but the Catholic Church does not recognize the existence of sorcerers or such evil forces (I have met White Fathers who believe that there are unexplainable psychic and physical phenomena in Africa), and moreover has no way of dealing with them. "But," says Dim Delobson (1934:136), "the Mossi believe so strongly in the power of such entities, that even those converted to Christianity cannot always escape the action of malevolent practitioners." The result is that many Catholics desert the church when they believe that only traditional specialists can help them with personal problems. Catholic families easily aban-

8: Skinner E-5 (1955-1957) 1958
FA28 Mossi FA28

don Christianity when told by shamans that to do so is necessary in order to have children. Unfortunately, the panoply of saints in modern French Catholicism does not seem to be able to syncretize with or displace the local deities, and thus come to the aid of the Mossi. This weakness of modern Catholicism in West Africa appears to make it unable to deal with many of the insecurities which arise in the daily lives of its adherents.

The American Protestant missionaries were never able to establish stations in either Manga or Nobéré because of the relative strengths of Catholicism and Islam in these two districts. However, they do have stations in Po and Koubri, 30 and 50 miles away. The 1954 census lists five Protestants in Manga, but I could find only one family head who had been a Protestant and that during the period when he worked for missionaries. It is interesting to note that when he returned to his native Manga he did not become a Catholic but embraced Islam instead. Although Protestants among the Mossi are trying very hard, they are working under three handicaps: (1) the opposition of the local administration, (2) their own explicit cultural bias, and (3) the puritanical nature of their brand of American Midwestern Protestantism.

The first Protestant missionaries to arrive in 1926 reported: "There has often been opposition to the preaching of the Gospel in the district, and there is a continual under-current which has hindered many from accepting Christ" (Assemblies of God Mission 1934:14). Americans who wished to train the young Mossi to read and write found official opposition to the use of the vernacular for such purposes, and were obliged to receive French teaching certificates. When one recognizes that in those days less than one-tenth of one percent of the Mossi children were in schools (today the number is just over three percent) one cannot help feeling that any kind of education would have been useful to the Mossi. During the war the Pétain-oriented administration restricted the movements of the Americans and frightened off their converts. And finally, the Americans come under the general disapprobation with which the Mossi view most Europeans.

American Protestants are fairly well insulated from the Mossi population, and have only now begun to show any interest in Mossi culture and problems. Geoffrey Gorer, who visited the Mossi in 1935, wrote:

> There were some American missionaries in this village, a whole family living in a house filled with texts; I do not know what creed they preached, or with what success; they looked more like American missionaries than I had thought anyone could have done off the films . . . they spoke with a dispassionate "none of our business" disapproval of the ill treatment of the negroes, who they said were ruled entirely by fear (1935:149).

Many of the Protestant missionaries who are now working with the Mossi are still inclined to agree with the first missionaries' ethnocentric judgement of their customs:

> Moral standards are very low. Nothing is wrong until it is found out. Chastity is unknown . . . we questioned in vain many natives in search of a suitable Mossi word for "virgin." They all declared there was no such word in their language. . . . Many